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WORKING PEOPLE'S EDUCATION

BY ROBERT SHAFER

THE Bryn Mawr College "Summer School for Women Workers in Industry" has had a certain amount of public attention; just how much I do not know. It was started at the suggestion of President Thomas "to offer young women of character and ability a fuller special education and an opportunity to study liberal subjects." The control of the school was vested in a joint administrative committee composed of representatives of industrial workers, of the college, and of the alumnae. It was opened on June 15 of the present year, with an enrolment restricted to 82. The students were chosen from as many industries and from as many parts of the country as possible. Each had a scholarship sufficient in amount to cover actual expenses at the college. Additional expenses, railway fare and the like, were in some cases provided for by clubs of women workers. The school was so organized that the life of its members should be approximately the same as that of usual Bryn Mawr students. Similarly the work of the school was collegiate in character. Of course the subject-matter of the teaching had to be restricted with regard to the preparation of the students, but this does not mean that the courses given were elementary. It means only that a distinction had to be drawn between subjects which require previous academic work and other subjects, equally within the province of higher education, for which adequate preparation can be got from experience of life. Such subjects were taught as modern literature, political and social history, government, and law.

This, in briefest summary, is the character of the school. It is too early to ask about its success, though about that something could be said; but it is not too early to ask what the experiment means. Is it merely a new freak of restless philanthropy? Or is there real need for such a school?

We shall get part of the answer to these questions by realizing that the Bryn Mawr Summer School is not an isolated novelty. Workers have not only begun to feel the need of education which at present they cannot get, but they have set about supplying it for themselves. Thus the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union supports a so-called Workers' University in New York; and the United Labor Education Committee, composed of members of some 30 different unions, conducts varied educational activities in the same city. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America are conducting lectures and classes in New York, Rochester, and Chicago. The Cleveland Garment Workers in 1920 inaugurated a Workers' University in that city. The Pennsylvania Federation of Labor in the fall of 1920 opened trade-union colleges in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and began holding labor classes in six other cities. So, too, there are recently established trade-union colleges in Washington, Boston, and Seattle; and classes in Chicago are held under the auspices of the Women's Trade Union League and the Chicago Federation of Labor. Amherst College also, through a committee representing the college and various labor organizations, has recently begun to hold classes for workers in nearby Massachusetts towns. A movement in being, with so many and varied manifestations as these, hardly requires proof of its need.

Americans do not have to be told the value of education. We have believed in it for everybody, and since earliest colonial days we have attempted to achieve it for everybody. Broadly speaking, we have encouraged education because this is a democracy, and democracies are hard to keep alive. People who have liberty do not instinctively prize it as do those without it; and to rule ourselves we should be able to think for ourselves. This, however, requires educated judgments and developed characters; it requires liberalizing education. But as America has developed industrially, schools all along the line, colleges included, have had to meet increasing demands for specialized vocational training. These demands have been met on the whole with success, and in one sense with fidelity to democratic principles; since it is obvious that vocational training has been a step towards equalizing opportunities.

On the other hand, there has resulted a line of cleavage running through our educational structure. On one side is "bread-and-butter" education, on the other is liberal education which is not necessarily concerned with earning a living. Which is "truer" education is a vain dispute, but the latter is the only kind which aims to produce responsible beings able to govern themselves. Yet liberal studies in their higher range have ever been expensive and have been the privilege of only the few. This is a national misfortune, though it is in itself really nobody's fault. For only the few have ever wished to go far in liberal studies, and probably only a few are capable of it. Moreover, it is certain that the love of wisdom was never successfully forced on anyone.

But there is no reason for supposing that the love of wisdom is confined to those with money and to the very young. On the contrary, depth of understanding and the aspiration to sound instructed thinking have always existed impartially in all classes of mature men and women. Yet in this country at this time there are vast numbers of people who are cut off from the possibility of full self-development. These people begin to realize their loss. Many of them are not seeking technical equipment, self-advancement, or the chance to lift themselves out of their surroundings; they are seeking along the line of what they know for liberal education. Caught with thousands of their fellows in a blind alley, the unconsidered result of our industrial development, they are seeking for what the rest of us would call merely some tolerable way of life. And with courage and spirit they have already set about the provision of liberalizing education for themselves. This is the inward meaning of the recent efflorescence of "trade-union colleges" in all parts of the country; this is the meaning of the Amherst College workingmen's classes and of the Bryn Mawr Summer School.

Here is the beginning of what is likely to be a great movement. It has rightly begun amongst workers themselves, for it could never have prospered otherwise. Experiments with "university extension" have shown that, if they have had no other good result. The truth is that the only education is self-education. Teachers can impart information and make suggestions,

but they are like sign-posts—they can only by example and precept point out the way. A sign-post is of no earthly use unless the person who consults it wants to go somewhere. So it is with education; if you do not want it yourself those who mean well by you can expose you to the most costly and pains-taking instruction through year after year and you will never get it.

Hence the movement for education amongst workingmen is hopeful just because it has begun with them. Yet like every good thing it has its dangerous possibilities. Dangerous, because no one needs to be told that at present labor is constantly in a state of contention with the rest of civilized society. One of the conditions of this warfare is that labor is suspicious of all who are not within its own ranks. Its leaders must be bone of its bone. But there are some who strive always to intensify labor's feeling that it is a class apart from the rest of society and wholly self-subsisting. There are many who cry aloud sudden, violent, and millennial remedies for the condition of the oppressed "wage-slaves." And these demagogues are prominent amongst those who day by day are actually "educating" labor. Probably most labor-leaders are sincere men—the trouble lies not in that direction. Many also are sensible men. Few, however, are trained save in the rough tumble of experience, and few have informed, disciplined minds. All, moreover, are leaders in a deliberate class war, which if immediately successful would destroy alike democracy and culture.

These are harsh words, but I do not say them by way of implied justification of large capitalists. I speak candidly just to make it plain how inevitably labor-leaders are partisans. This is not their fault but it may be at any time society's misfortune. For these are the men who, as was said, are actually "educating" labor. In conversation and set speech, in periodical and book, in all the routine of building up a firm organization, these men have for years been hammering into the heads of their followers certain dogmas the drift of which we all vaguely know. Thus has been preparing that solidified class spirit necessary for the epoch of regeneration—the "dictatorship of the proletariat." And now that amongst some of the keenest men and women in

labor's ranks a sense not merely of material but of intellectual and cultural things missed has begun to arise, there is evident an effort to turn the new desire to the old purpose. Most, if not all, of the newly arisen labor colleges are frankly partisan, separatist institutions. The authorities of the Workers' College of Seattle say: "Education in our universities and colleges is essentially capitalistic, in that it glorifies competition and seeks to produce an efficient individual. Education that may properly be called labor education is essentially socialistic, in that it glorifies coöperation and seeks to produce an efficient social and industrial order."

There can be no mistaking the intention of this moderately worded statement, and it is only a sample. These schools in fact are not so much the instructors as the creatures of labor. They are educational closed shops. "Coöperation," writes Mr. Arthur Gleason in a recent pamphlet,¹ "except in such elementary subjects as English, with public school authorities may mean that a censorship and a control are exercised, or else that they may be imminent as a threat with the same results on freedom of discussion as if they were exercised." The Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor formerly advocated coöperation with public authorities in the cause of workers' education wherever possible, but Mr. Gleason says that in so doing the Council's "naïve failure to distinguish between the existent institutions of the political state, and the experiments in industrial democracy made by the workers, cuts the tap root of labor education."

If this separatist spirit were nothing but a manly independence it might be good, but it is a different thing. Indeed the spirit of tyrannical dogmatism would feel comfortably at home in most of these "colleges." And education is not the name for what they attempt; propaganda is the word. It is an ugly word for an ugly thing. It is the effort deliberately to inculcate a pre-determined doctrine on the assumption that here is contained the whole law and the prophets. This is about as far removed

¹ *Workers' Education*. Bureau of Industrial Research, 1921. A good survey of the subject is to be found in *Adult Working-class Education in Great Britain and the United States*, by C. P. Sweeney, Bulletin 271 of the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1920.

as possible from true education. The joint administrative committee of the Bryn Mawr Summer School has voted that "the Summer School shall not be committed to any dogma or theory, but shall conduct its teaching in a broad spirit of impartial inquiry, with absolute freedom of discussion and academic freedom of teaching." That is the spirit of true education, and without it you do not have education at all. It means simply that in any subject student and teacher alike should read not one but all the authorities and through discussion form their own independent opinions of each. It means that the one thing inculcated is faithfulness to the truth wherever it may be found. Such education, however, cannot issue from propagandists who are working in the supposed interest of an exclusive class.

But there is another side to the story. Repeatedly have public education authorities discouraged or fought workingmen in their efforts after education. Repeatedly have workingmen been refused even the use of school buildings for no reason that officials have been willing to state. And where workingmen have used public buildings this has too often been made the excuse for a censorship of opinions—proving the need of Mr. Gleason's warning, already quoted. In brief, such an attitude of hostility towards workingmen's education has been so evident in many parts of the country as inevitably to strengthen labor's tendency towards class hatred. Thus stupidly and insanely—there are no other words—has only too much substance been given to labor's contention that American educational establishments are themselves agents of propaganda, and that you can only fight the devil with fire.

Here is the opportunity for American colleges: that when keen workingmen want education they should actually get it, and get the best there is. By the path of their natural present interests they should be brought to some vision of education as a way of life; they should get trained judgments and informed intellects, issuing in some real understanding of themselves and of their surrounding world. Their teaching should be suited to mature men and women with experience of life. It should not consist of short, unrelated lecture-courses, of the "spoon-feeding" familiar to generations of undergraduates, but of

prolonged work upon definite subjects, carried on through discussion and reading and accompanied by written work. Teacher and student should be equals, helping each other and learning from each other; and above all the student should be made to feel as free as the teacher to express any opinion that he holds, and both teacher and student should have the wholesome experience of rigorous argument.

This will not be easy work. The first teachers will have to be chosen with extraordinary care, for much in after years will depend upon the kind of start made. But even harder will probably be the task of getting in touch with the "demand"—with workingmen themselves. I have attempted to show how inevitably these are suspicious of the colleges, and how this suspicion has been not allayed but re-inforced by the blindness of many educational authorities. Colleges will have to remember these facts, and to make allowances, and to "come back" after discouragement. Colleges should not mistakenly force their attentions, because they are well meant, upon any individuals or groups. They should, on the other hand, be eager to grasp even forlorn-looking chances for their work. They should never attempt exclusively to manage what they do, but should proceed by joint committees, after the manner of Amherst and Bryn Mawr, to coöperate with existing labor groups. They should see to it that representation on these committees is equal, in reality as well as in appearance, on both sides, and should insist only on freedom of teaching. And colleges should, perhaps most important of all, go in for quality, not quantity. It should be realized from the outset that such work as is here suggested will never attract the majority of workingmen, or of any other large class. Only the keenest will ever be drawn into it and held.

No one should suppose, however, that working people's education conducted on the highest plane is a visionary notion. The reception given to the mere announcement of the Bryn Mawr Summer School revealed a demand of probably unsuspected intensity. It is true, the response to Bryn Mawr's undertaking may be at present discounted on several scores. The apparent novelty of the scheme is one, and to this may be added the

fact that the courses given are very short, numerous, and diversified. Thus it may be thought that no matter how high the standard of teaching, the actual accomplishment cannot be great, nor can the work involve sustained effort on the part of the students.

Certainly these considerations have some weight, but there is another direction in which we may look for information and guidance. Education for working people is in England no longer in the experimental stage. Eighteen years ago, after other attempts along varied lines, an organization was instituted in a small way which has continuously grown since in numbers and in strength, and which has by now spread to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa. This is the Workers' Educational Association, whose most important achievement has been the university tutorial class. In 1908 there were 2 of these classes, with 60 students; in 1919 there were 153 classes, with 3,799 students. This is the more impressive because the standard maintained is that for university honors work, and each student pledges himself to three years' work in the subject of his choice, consisting of attendance upon 24 two-hour meetings each year, besides much reading and study, and the writing of an essay every fortnight. At the conclusion of the work the students do not receive even diplomas or certificates, nor is the work intended to promote their material advancement. While in the beginning this undertaking was regarded as almost chimerical even by its well-wishers, it has prospered, has weathered the war-years, and is now firmly established as a valued part of England's educational system.

It is well also for us to know that at the outset of the movement in England there was general distrust of the universities, and even hostility against them, amongst workingmen. As the years have passed hostility and suspicion have been largely dissolved; and at no time have they seemed to work against the real success of the tutorial classes. Moreover the movement has already had a perceptible effect in bringing the universities and the people of England more closely together. The English movement has, in addition, been continuously exposed to hostile criticism from propagandists who are seeking to foment a class

war. This criticism has come largely from the Labor College, a socialist organization analogous to the Rand School in New York. The Workers' Educational Association has successfully met such criticism by holding solidly to its own high ideal.

This surely is full evidence of the practicability of working people's education involving prolonged effort and conducted on the highest plane. Its benefit to the workers themselves is obvious, and so great that it cannot be exaggerated. It means for the keenest of them the difference between stunted growth, intellectual starvation, and an incalculably enriched life, animated by new vision and hope. It means that amongst all of them will gradually spread new influences and ideals, taught in the only efficacious way, by example, not by precept, and taught also by those who are likely to become leaders. The colleges, too, will be strengthened; they will learn as much in such work as they teach, and they will become bound by ties of common understanding to the life of a large part of the nation from which now they are estranged. One cannot but conclude that there would result, even within the space of a single generation, a greater cohesion in the national life, a drawing together, not apart, of classes in recent years widely separated from each other. In these days, with no uncertain portents on almost every horizon, it should scarcely be needful to say that no other one thing is more to be desired if the cause of responsible liberty is not to perish from among us.

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